

**Remarks of Governor Haley Barbour
On Being Named An Honorary Patron
Of Trinity College's University Philosophical Society
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It is not my purpose today to try to make you an expert on American politics. That's beyond my capacity, besides I expect this college would like to charge you tuition to take a course on the subject.

I will try to give a brief overview of my country's political history, or at least of the last few decades.

That will allow me to put in context some thoughts on this month's historic presidential election ... what it means and what it may or may not mean.

Our news media has a tendency to overestimate what campaigns and elections mean ... to overstate the effects that will result. In our country that is particularly true if the Left wins.

But first, a little review of how we got here.

As the oldest democracy, the United States has seen remarkable stability in its political process. Major reasons are the two-party system and our republican form of government.

Our federal system means one party can control the Executive Branch, while the other controls one or both houses of Congress. State governments can be led by Republicans while a Democrat is in the White House, and vice versa.

Federalism is a fairly obvious element of American government; it is constitutional. The two-party system, on the other hand, was neither ordained by the Constitution nor much appreciated by the Founding Fathers. Indeed, Washington and Madison were very critical of "factions," the word they used to describe political parties.

For more than two hundred years my country has usually had just two parties competing for Americans' votes. The names changed a few times early on; but the vast majority of the time; the vast majority of Americans voted either Republican or Democrat.

When you divide the electorate into only two factions, necessarily both parties must be coalitions. Nearly sixty million voters voted for John McCain this month, and he lost! Barack Obama got millions more

votes in winning. It is obvious to all of us here that not everyone who voted for either of them agrees on every issue.

These necessarily coalitional parties are broad and diverse. The Democrats are the Liberal Party of America, while the Republicans are the Conservative Party. But both parties are coalitions, and there are conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans. Some Republicans are to the left of some Democrats, but the center of the Democratic Party is to the left of the center of the Republican Party.

The fact that both parties are coalitions allowed what Montesquieu called the "Miracle of America."

Montesquieu correctly concluded that the two parties were balanced as if on a teeter-totter or a see-saw board. If one party moves too far away from the center, then enough voters abandon them and move back to the center and into the arms of the other party so that the system never gets too far out of balance. Hence America stays politically "centrist." Center-right or center-left.

That doesn't mean America's political system results in policies that are in the center of Europe's political views or the World's. But our two-party system keeps our country's politicians and public policy near the center of American public opinion, somewhere near the views of most Americans.

Now, if you accept this hypothesis as accurate, where does that put the majority of U.S. voters today?

You can start a heated argument with that question, and I suggest no one knows the answer yet.

A lot of American elections that turn out the party in power actually don't change the direction of public policy very much.

As a recent example President Clinton's defeat of President George H. W. Bush in 1992 ended twelve years of Republicans in the White House. The Democrats had large majorities in both Houses of Congress, and, while Clinton had run as a moderate . . ."a new kind of Democrat" as he put it at the time, Americans quickly decided the Democrats were trying to go too far left, too fast. Where in 1992's election Republicans had been reduced to forty-three (43) Senators of 100 and 174 Representatives of 435; and our presidential candidate had received the lowest percentage of the vote of any GOP candidate for president since 1912, within two short years Republicans had majorities in both the Houses of Congress.

In 1994 Republicans' won the greatest mid-term majority sweep since 1930. No one would have predicated that at this time in 1992. Indeed, the media had predicted just the opposite ... the end of Reaganism. To the contrary, Clinton's presidency, during which Republicans controlled both Houses of Congress for six of eight years, had much in common with Reagan's goals: a balanced budget, welfare reform and expansions of free trade.

In the U.S. it is not unusual for this to happen; for the White House to change parties in an election; but public policy to change very little. Consider Eisenhower's two terms: the New Deal wasn't reversed; containment of communism continued to be American policy. Even Nixon's time in the White House not only expanded domestic government regulation far beyond what the Democrats had done but rolled back no Great Society welfare program.

In truth there have been few transformative presidential elections in American history: 1800, 1828, 1860 and 1896. And I would suggest only two in the twentieth century: 1932 and 1980.

The question to be considered is whether 2008 will be a presidential election that dramatically changes the direction of public policy in the United States ... a transformative election.

There is no question this election is historic. For America to elect an African-American as its president is powerful. Mine is a country that enforced slavery of African-Americans less than one hundred fifty years ago ... where six hundred thousand citizens died in a war largely over slavery ... where less than fifty years ago segregation of the races was enforced by law in a significant portion of the country and practiced de facto in much more.

Senator Barack Obama has been elected President of the United States in a landslide, carrying three of the largest southern states along the way. It is quite remarkable, and I think admirable.

And he is being accepted as our elected leader by those who opposed him in the campaign, just as Bush, Clinton, Reagan and Kennedy were accepted.

But that doesn't mean he will be transformational in the manner of Franklin Roosevelt or Ronald Reagan.

Beginning with the 1978 mid-term congressional elections; Republicans and conservatism began to ascend in American politics

and policy making. I should note that American conservatism identifies, especially in economic policy, with what Europeans refer to as “classic liberalism,” free market and capitalism are termed conservative in the U.S. But back to our story.

Having survived it myself, I’m always amazed that the GOP had seemed on its death bed only four years before its 1978 surge. Watergate, Nixon’s resignation, the first Arab oil embargo and a sharp recession drove Republican numbers into the tank. In 1974 there were polls showing only 18% of Americans considered themselves Republicans, and the national party Chairman actually appointed a committee to consider whether to change the name of the party.

But after Jimmy Carter defeated President Ford in 1976, Republicans made gains in the ’78 midterms, and Ronald Reagan then defeated Carter by a large margin in 1980. Republicans and the majority of the country opted for center-right government and stuck with it.

By the way, Carter’s defeat in ’80, after only one term as president, marks the only time since 1896 that a party’s candidate won the White House and that party failed to keep it for at least a second term.

Despite a recession that deepened in 1982, Reagan stayed the course, won a giant re-election victory in ’84 and dominated U.S. public policy into the 21st Century.

Yet Reagan’s party did not dominate nearly as much. Republicans did win five of seven presidential elections, and the one Democrat of the period, Bill Clinton, is one of only three presidents ever to be elected and reelected president without receiving a majority of the popular vote.

Still, Democrats had congressional majorities’ much of this time, and there were periodic rises of third parties, like that of Ross Perot, who received nineteen percent of the vote in the 1992 presidential election and nearly ten percent four years later.

Competitive third parties aren’t the norm in U.S. politics, nor do we usually have long periods of divided government. Yet there was a lot of both during this recent period when Republican ideas of limited government, low taxes, open markets and free trade and a strong national defense strongly prevailed.

There was one similar, relatively long period late in the nineteenth century. From the end of Reconstruction in 1876, when Republicans

stole the presidential election for Rutherford B. Hayes, until 1896 there was a period when the two parties were often at parity; and third parties, like the Progressive Party, rose to actually control some state governments and elect U.S. Senators.

This nineteenth century period of essential equilibrium between the two great parties also coincided with a time when America was shifting from an agrarian to an industrial economy, with all the dislocation that entailed. These similarities are interesting as we consider the effect of the 2008 election.

This period of parity ended in 1896 when William McKinley won what turned out to be a transformational election that made Republicans the dominant party until 1930, when the Great Depression led to a long period of Rooseveltian Democrat dominance. During this Republican period there was major reform in government, particularly under Theodore Roosevelt, and the laissez-faire capitalistic economy boomed for a decade before the bust began in 1929 and Democrats roared back. 1932 was a transformational election.

During this Democrat era America moved to the left, and citizens, first strangled by the deepest, longest economic downturn in U.S. history and then thrown into World War II, saw government as the only answer to the gigantic problems facing them and the country. Laissez-faire gave way to an alphabet of government agencies steering the economy, and, of course, when the war came in full, it became the primary economic and cultural driver.

Republican Congresses elected in 1946 and 1950 successfully resisted most of Truman's even more leftish domestic programs; then Eisenhower's two terms were more a cooling off period than any reversal of the center-left policies of the previous twenty years.

Not John Kennedy, who was actually rather conservative on economic and national security policy, but his successor, Lyndon Johnson, made the last charge for the Left with his Great Society programs.

While Nixon did not really disturb the liberal programs Johnson put in place, the mood of the country clearly began to swing to the right in the late Sixties.

The counter-culture, identified with drugs and the anti-war movement, appalled many Americans. Anarchist tactics by groups like the Weather Underground and Black Panthers, were far beyond the Pale even in a very tolerant country like the U.S.

Watergate was more about corruption than policy disagreements, so when Carter's presidency became best known for stagflation (an economic condition where high unemployment and high inflation occur simultaneously), for malaise and for American diplomats held hostage in our own embassy in Iran; not only did Republicans win the White House with Ronald Reagan; they won what turned out to be a transformational election, the first since 1932, resulting in pushes for center-right policies on many levels. These center-right policies took hold, and, as I mentioned earlier, prevailed through George Bush's reelection in 2004.

Now Senator Obama has won, in no small part because of President Bush's unpopularity.

American politics is somewhat cyclical; since World War II, a political party has kept the White House for a third consecutive term only once ... in 1988, when the first President Bush defeated Democrat Michael Dukakis. Most voters would tell you Bush won in 1988 because they thought Dukakis was unacceptable rather than a desire for the status quo.

So the "eight years and you're out" tradition probably played a big role in Obama's win, but it was definitely more than that.

Americans don't like long wars. Korea and Vietnam proved that. Clearly the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were unpopular with a lot of voters, particularly women and young people.

Finally, and most powerfully, fear of where the economy is headed, not to mention the financial losses already suffered by millions of families, caused many voters to support the candidate most identified with change.

All these giant issues and factors favored Obama. Some of my friends wonder that McCain didn't do even worse. Considering that George McGovern, Walter Mondale and Bob Dole all received lower percentages at far less perilous times, I think McCain did about as well as he could, unless he had made Obama unacceptable ... something he really did not focus on until far too late to have any chance of succeeding.

Now, will 2008 turn out to have been a transformational election for the Left, as was 1932? Or has America swung back to the left just during the crisis rather than for a generation?

Remembering that the last two Democrats elected president were Southern moderates, does the election of the most left-wing U.S. Senator tell us that the majority wants to move significantly to the left on public policy, or is it simply that voters wanted change and Obama, who is extremely charismatic, was not only acceptable but very attractive and reassuring.

As a small government, low tax, rational regulation capitalist, and an open market internationalist, I recognize when people are worried they not only may lose their jobs, but also their savings and their homes ... that their kids can't go to college or borrow money to buy a car, those people will look for help; and government often will appear to be the only place big enough to help. Certainly there are millions of Americans who feel that way right now.

How long will that last? That will be greatly affected by how the economy fares in the coming year ... whether Obama and his team are perceived as having produced positive results. Does consumer confidence return, and over what period of time?

Are left wing ideas like card check, to increase union membership by bending the rules in favor of the unions and against employers, going to be enacted? What would result?

Perhaps most of all, how does the gigantic government bailout of the financial services industry, and whoever else is added, actually turn out? It is the closest thing to socialism in American economic history.

If it is accepted by the American people as an appropriate way to manage our economy, I believe it can't be interpreted as anything other than a major shift to the left, and perhaps for a long time into the future.

Significantly, like the late 19th Century, today is also a period of massive economic change. Beginning with the move from an industrial to an information economy, and now with the impact of the incredible free movement of money, in no time, to anywhere. Economic change may lend itself to making this a transformational election as did the economy of 1896.

On the other hand, will Americans decide this was a bad idea, born of fear ... of the view that somebody had to do something ... that any effort was better than no effort? And that once tried, government's bailing out and buying up private industries - financial or automotive - really isn't the right answer. That rapid economic change may cut

against big government change. Too much change too fast can be scary, too.

I wish I could tell you which of those scenarios will be the case. But I don't know, and I sincerely believe no one else does. As testimony to that, I think you'll see this Obama administration appear to stay as close to the center as possible for a while. There will be enormous pressure from his long time allies on the left - unions and community organizers - to push farther left, but I believe Obama will try to resist.

He is a man of the American left, but he is also a phenomenally gifted and smart politician. I bet he'll try not to get too far ahead of the people or get thrown off Montesquieu's teeter-totter.

We'll see.

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